

Bennetts Rice Mill
Charleston
Charleston County
South Carolina

HABS No. 13-7

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of South Carolina
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Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office
for Southeast Unit

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BENNETT'S RICE MILL
Southeast Corner of Society and Concord Streets
Charleston, Charleston County
South Carolina

Owner: Seaboard Air Line Railroad.

Date of Erection: North wing, 1830; south wing, 1844.

Architect: Governor Thomas Bennett (?).

Builder: Not known.

Present Condition: Fair.

Number of Stories: Four.

Materials of Construction: Brick,

Other Existing Records: See text. ¹

Additional Data: See following pages.

¹ See Smith A.R.H., The Dwelling Houses of Charleston.

BENNETTS RICE MILL
Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina

Date of erection: Second quarter nineteenth century

Present condition: Poor

Description:

Brick, common bond; four stories; south facade five bays, avant corps arrière corps scheme (a system of advanced and recessed pavilions); first story rusticated, with arched windows set in arched reveal, except center door, which has a wooden enframing set into brickwork. Central bay has heroic arched and mullioned window lighting. Second and third stories framed by Doric columns set in antis. Flanking bays have 12/12-light windows framed by Egyptian-style brick architraves splayed at bottom, dog-eared at top, supporting alternately brick pediment and entablature. Above these on line of the fanlight of the center window are square openings glazed with paired six-light casement windows and surrounded by dog-eared brick architraves. The bays are accented by Doric pilasters, which on the west elevation support a full entablature. On the south front the upper members of the entablature are omitted, perhaps as an alteration, and huge attic windows corresponding to those of the second floor occur. On the west elevation the attic is lighted by horizontal grilled openings.

At the rear is a smaller building, part of which seems to be eighteenth-century. The west elevation is four bays, two stories, below a full entablature and a high attic. The first story has a segmental arcade; the second short rectangular window openings, now boarded. The brickwork of this area is Flemish bond, but the attic is common. The architectural evidence would indicate that the corner Doric piers and entablature are a later addition.

Thomas T. Waterman

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BENNETT'S RICE MILL
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

SURVEY NO. 13-7

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Bennett's Rice Mill was a product of the flood tide of the rice industry of South Carolina. The rice crop of the great plantations, at first threshed and pounded by hand, had reached by 1800 such enormous volume that its preparation had to be made by machines operated by wind or water. By 1817 steam had been applied to furnish the motive power. With its application, it may be said that the first industrial architecture appeared, and numerous mills were built in South Carolina for the preparation of the rice crop for the market.

Of these mills, Bennett's Mill is the most elaborate that remains in existence today. The design of its façade is certainly unique, but from what sources its design was drawn is yet to be revealed. Certainly we can find traces of a copy of one Italian palace window in one place, an idea from another palace next to it, and a suggestion of a third somewhere else, all translated into brick, with odd and original touches throughout.

That the elevations of the southern block were designed solely as elevations and not in conjunction with the plan is apparent upon study of the building itself. The bays of the interior floor framing bear no relation to the exterior projections and fenestration, and occasionally the ends of the girders strike the exterior walls at the windows instead of on the brick piers, this proving that plan and elevation

were not thought of as a whole.

This mill was built for Governor Thomas Bennett, one of the richest of the low-country plantation owners. I was informed by Mr. A. B. Murray, Governor Bennett's son-in-law, who died in 1928, that Governor Bennett first built the north wing of this mill as a saw mill in 1830, while the main southern block was constructed in 1844. He also stated that at the time of its construction the engine room between the two wings had a beautiful wrought iron railing leading to the different levels and platforms. This has today entirely disappeared. Portions of the fourth story walls were shaken down during the earthquake of 1886, but were restored shortly after.

Governor Bennett's grandson, Mr. John Bennett, tells me that according to family tradition this building was actually designed by his grandfather. This may well be the case, on account of the peculiar relation between plan and elevation mentioned above, which would indicate an amateur architect working for the exterior effect only.

The building is now owned by the Seaboard Air Line Railway, and is rented by them to Frederick Richards, ship broker, and used for storage.

Source of Material: "The Architectural Significance of the Rice Mills of Charleston, S. C." by Samuel Lapham, Jr. - The Architectural Record of August, 1924.

Date by Dist Officer.

Approved:

Samuel Lapham, Jr.

District Officer #13

Revised 1936, H.C.F.

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"When rice was introduced as a staple crop in South Carolina, there seems to have been some difficulty in separating the chaff from the kernel judging from the fact that the colony was offering rewards for the encouragement of more effective means for accomplishing the same. Thus we find in the laws of 1733 a special act passed for encouragement of Francis Garcia of Charles Town for "projecting and making an engine for the more expeditious beating and pounding of rice". Also to "encourage Charles Lowndes to make a new maching to pound and beat rice and to appropriate the benefit therof to himself."

Also in 1736 Peter Villeponteaux was rewarded for his "projection of a new instrument for cleaning rice".

All of these machines would seem very crude now, and were worked probably altogether by hand power. With the introduction of steam, of course, the methods were all revolutionized, and the great rice mills of the Carolinas and Georgias were built. The three most known to the people of Charleston were Bennett, West Point and Chisolm's, the latter built upon the site of the old "Sugar House" at the foot of Tradd Street, used for a long time as a prison until 1775; then sold later for a projected cotton mill, and finally upon part of the site was built the rice mill.

Some Interesting Data

For the information relating to the subject of this sketch the writer is indebted to the courtesy of Mr. Andrew Murray, in a letter replying to my request for data and enclosing a beautifully executed plat of the mill and grounds. The following is quoted from a note on this plat:

"Saw Mill - Built of brick in 1830, three stories high, cost \$35,000. Rice mill built in 1845 of brick, four stories slate roof; cost \$50,000. The middle walls of these mills are independent and really blank. Engine and boiler house enclosed in walls almost solid and iron doors. Over boiler house are tanks with 15,000 gallons water. Over engine house tank with 20,000 gallons, conducted through mills with iron pipes and hose attached. The mills are isolated and surrounded by water. Two steam engines within 250 yards and paved streets. Never on fire and seldom insured by former proprietor.

"Store house for rough rice built in 1845 of brick; slate roof; three stories high, surrounded by water. Small boiler encased in brick for elevating rice."

This quoted in full to show how thoroughly equipped were these mills against fire, and also how substantial were the structures.

The saw mill referred to above is the building on the north side built in 1830 of exquisite workmanship. Even the ceiling of the first floor is paneled and the beams and rafters are beveled, although this work was evidently by hand.

The other part, known as the rice mill, built in 1845, is of equally fine construction, the outside ornamented with handsome brick columns, around the large windows on the south and west sides. These two windows are very beautiful with artistic fan lights, and fine woodwork. The smaller windows are also finished in ornamental brick work. The cost of building quoted from the plat does not include the pile foundations, machinery, etc., but only the buildings.

Built by Governor Bennett

The mills were built by Governor Thomas Bennett and operated by him until his death. He was succeeded by his son, M. W. J. Bennett, who operated them until his death in 1874, when they passed on to C. S. Bennett & Co., until 1894, when they were acquired by Mr. A. B. Murray, who operated them until 1912.

"The mills were kept running during the entire period of the Confederate War, although under fire and repeatedly struck. Eighty odd shells fell on the premises during the day time, and many at night. The original office was of brick. Its north end was struck down by a shell at night. This end was partitioned off and the office continued in use until the present one was built on the old foundation some eighteen years later. Fortunately no one was injured during the shelling period. Some important parts of the machinery were destroyed, but were repaired and the work went on."

Mr. Murray relates an amusing, though very nearly a tragic anecdote of this time. A negro cooper was working in the shop at his business of making barrels, when a shell fell nearby, burying itself in the earth and exploding deep down, making a great hole in the ground into which the cooper and his bench fell, followed by a great pile of shavings. He was unhurt and refused to be taken out, saying that was the safest place, as shells, like lightning seldom struck the same place twice.

Iron Rails from Old S. C. Railroad

The house for storing the rough rice was located across from the mills, near the wharves, from the latter the grain was hoisted from the holds of the rice schooners unto the storehouse. Tramways connected this storehouse with the mills, and the rice was transported across in large bodied cars, one of which can still be seen near the mill. The flat iron rails used in this

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tramway are most interesting. It is said to be some of the iron used on the old South Carolina railroad, the first railroad built in this state, and one of the first in the United States. The railroad ran from Charleston to Hamburg, S. C., near Augusta. Mr. W. J. Bennett, who succeeded his father, the builder of these mills, is authority for this statement. Governor Bennett who was one of the earliest officials of the South Carolina railroad, bought some of this iron when it was replaced by a heavier rail, and used some in his mill.

The iron is flat and was secured to wooden stringers, by spikes.

The Bennett Rice Mills were bought by the Seaboard Air Line, and the docks of this company are built over the site of the storehouse and wharves on the waterfront. The mills are still standing, and attest by their solidity to the good workmanship which was put upon them.

The machinery has been removed. The engine was very interesting and was operated by a large walking beam, such as is used on steamboats.

Fine Example of Wrought Iron Work

The iron railing which stood around the machinery was a beautiful piece of wrought iron work. Into the three panels were wrought the names of three great inventors of steam machinery. One of these was Watts. The names were surrounded by scroll work, and the whole was of most artistic design and beautiful execution.

It is probable that this was some of the work of Werner, that very artistic worker in iron, who made so much of the beautiful iron work in gates, fences and balconies for which Charleston is famous.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. SC-13-7

BENNETT'S RICE MILL

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Address: Between East Bay, Hasell, Concord, and Laurens Streets, Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina.

An addendum to
Bennett's Rice Mill
Society and Concord Streets
Charleston, South Carolina
in HABS Catalog (1941)

Present Owner: South Carolina State Ports Authority, 1 Vendue Range, Charleston, South Carolina.

Brief Statement of Significance: This 1844 rice mill was in constant operation during the Civil War, and is one of the more elaborate examples of early industrial architecture in Charleston and is in the Classic Revival style.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Governor Thomas Bennett, the original owner. /Samuel Lapham, Jr., "The Architectural Significance of the Rice Mills of Charleston, S. C.," in the Architectural Record, August 1924, p. 182.]
2. Date of erection: 1844 [Ibid.]
3. Notes on alterations and additions: An older mill, to which this building was joined, has been torn down in the present century.

- B. Historical Events Connected With The Structure: The mill was kept in continuous operation during the War Between the States, although constantly under shell fire during the bombardment of Charleston, August 1863--February 1865. /Alfred O. Halsey, in Charleston City Year Book of 1937, p. 207.]

Prepared by Beatrice St. J. Ravenel
Architectural Historian
Charleston
July 1958.

- C. Supplemental Information: Only the west wall of the building shown on the 1958 photographs now remains standing, the others having fallen during a hurricane in 1959. The remaining wall has been reinforced with vertical steel structural sections and braced with diagonal tubular steel struts anchored to the ground.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
National Park Service
June 1962.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This four-story brick mill in the Classic Revival was one of the more elaborate industrial buildings in Charleston but little remains.
2. Condition of fabric: Poor.

B. Technical Description of Exterior.

1. Overall dimensions: Four stories high
2. Foundations and wall construction: Brick
3. Doorways and doors: Wood frames, wood doors with glass upper half.
4. Windows and shutters: Wood window frames. Palladian windows over doors on west and south. No shutters.
5. Roof: Flat, covered with tin.
6. Cornice: Projecting stucco and brick courses.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plan: Boiler room two stories high; remainder of floor space on first and second floors undivided; third and fourth stories interior space undivided.
2. Stairways: One stairway.
3. Floor: Wood floors.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Brick.
5. Doorways and doors: Wood.

6. Trim: Wood beams.
 7. Hardware: Metal.
 8. Lighting: None.
 9. Heating: None.
- D. Site: Faces west on railroad yards, east on river.

Prepared by Miss Emma R. Martin
August 1958.

Addendum To:

HABS NO. SC-13-7

BENNETT'S RICE MILL

Between East Bay, Hasell, Concord, and Laurens Streets

Charleston Vicinity

Charleston County

South Carolina

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127